

# Philo of Alexandria

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Philo was born in Alexandria Egypt in 20BCE and lived as a contemporary of Jesus (Satran, 714). His life and writings provide evidence for ideologies and practices that some Jews believed about the Law and Jewish custom during the time of Jesus. However, he and Jesus never actually met, so Philo cannot be a valid source of access to what Jesus thought. Philo remained one of the only members of his family to stay fairly out of politics. Instead, he focused his days maintaining a strong Greek and Jewish education that would lead him to a career analyzing and providing influential commentary on scriptures and Jewish Law. His life was focused around a philosophical inquiry of the Torah. He examined every bit and piece of moral values hidden within the texts and questioned what the Torah sought for its followers to perform and live their lives as.

Of his writings, there are thought to be 75 treatises. However, only 52 of these are currently extant<sup>1</sup>, the others having been lost, destroyed, or otherwise living on as fragmented bits of a whole. Philo wrote in three general categories including exegetical, philosophical, and apologetic (Sterling, 260). Exegetical is defined as a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, specifically a religious text and is what Philo has been most acclaimed for. He wrote for a wide variety of audiences, not just tailoring his writings toward Jewish scholars and followers. In fact, there was a strong Hellenistic and Roman influence in his works, working alongside Jewish tradition and doctrine. Together, his extant works provide an important source for late Second Temple Judaism (Sterling, 253).

For his exegetical works, Philo focused on the first two books of the Old Testament, Genesis and Exodus. In particular, Philo took an interest in Moses and Abraham (Sterling, 268). His *Exposition* and *On The Life of Moses* expresses how the Law has been embodied throughout history within the person of Moses. In *On the Life of Abraham*, Abraham stands as another individual who, like Moses, is seen as the ideal man who leads the ideal life. Philo does not translate the Torah and its characters, but rather retells it with a

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<sup>1</sup> Sterling, 261. Elaborates on other records by stating that there are 36 full treatises in Greek and 13 treatises in Armenian, equaling 49 rather than 52. The 52 mentioned include the three fragments of Philo's works.

philosophical and critical lens to express an interpretation of the Law and Torah. *On the Decalogue*, another exegetical work, is a summation of the laws held within the Ten Commandments. Philo draws comparisons between the Jewish understandings of these laws in relation to their pagan neighbors. This comes in part due to his Jewish upbringing and the Hellenization and Greco-Roman influences that his readers would have understood. This Greco-Roman context is especially present in the *Exposition of the Laws*. This comprehensive retelling of the Pentateuch draws connections and accessible explanations of key events, characters, and teachings that extend from Judaism into a Hellenistic culture. This is particularly important as Philo wrote primarily in Greek, translating the Hebrew texts into a more vernacular language (Sterling, 260). Having more translations allowed for critical discussions in a broader audience.

In a more critical context, Philo examined possible problems within the biblical text and offered solutions for them in the *Questions and Answers* fragments. He mainly used the Septuagint as his referencing text, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Through his analyses, a comparison for modern and ancient literary practices and understandings is accomplishable.

Philo references *Logos*, or “reason” in his allegorical studies. This concept stands as an intermediary between God and the material world. *Logos* separates the two realms where humanity has both a worldly body and a spiritual transcendent realm to occupy (Satran, 717). Philo’s particular take on *Logos* was that the soul had the ability to ascend, a concept developed later in Middle Platonism and Judaism (Satran, 715). Philo reconciles Platonic philosophy and ancient Jewish religious practice. His allegorical works search for a deeper, allegorical meaning behind what is written on the page. Philo wrote *Allegorical Interpretation* which was his most complex and weighty piece of literature. He dives into the text, again mainly the first two books Genesis and Exodus, to explore the journey of the virtue-loving soul as it reaches toward God (Sterling, 263). He goes line-by-line in a close-text analysis to propose interpretation in the allegorical realm. For example, in retelling the story of Adam and Eve, Philo interprets it as Adam standing as the earthly and corruptible mind. Eve is sensual and is the personification of the senses. The serpent is pleasure and an evil entity. These allegorical readings have been examined to stem from a detailed literary

understanding through the literature of Homer and Hesiod (Sterling, 264). This is another instance where Philo connects multiple pantheons, religions, and literary styles.

Works cited:

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